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ORIGINAL SIN

WHY THINGS AREN'T THE WAY THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO BE

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Scripture: Genesis 3:1-7, Luke 15:25-32

"I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me."
Psalm 51:3 (NRSV)

Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the great American theologians of this century, a distinguished intellectual and scholar, once observed:

> "The doctrine of original sin is the one empirically verifiable doctrine of Christian faith." [*The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr,* ed. by Robert McAee Brown, xii]

Danny Glover, in support of the Niebuhrian hypothesis put it: "Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this."

It was in the motion picture "Grand Canyon." An attorney, in his expensive sports car, tries to take a short cut to avoid traffic after an NBA game. The streets become more ominous, menacing, darker. Then the unthinkable happens. His car stalls and won't start again. He calls a tow truck but before it arrives five young toughs appear, surround the car, and threaten serious harm. Just at that moment the tow truck arrives. The driver pays no attention to the tough young men, but instead starts to hook up the sports car to his tow truck. The gang bangers protest . . . this interruption is about to deprive them of money and their evening's entertainment. And it is then that the driver, Danny Glover, takes the gang leader aside and says,

> "Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without askin' if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything is supposed to be different than what it is here." [See Cornelius Plantinga, "Not the Way It's Supposed To Be, A Breviary of Sin," *Theology Today,* July 1993, p. 179]

Professor Niebuhr, John Calvin, St. Augustine, or St. Paul could not have said it better. Things aren't supposed to be this way.

A professor at Calvin College, Cornelius Plantinga, has written a clever essay on the topic of sin in which he says God intends harmony — what is supposed to be is "peace," — Shalom.

What would the world as God intended it to be look like? Would there be hard rock music? "Yes," said the professor, "there would be hard rock, but it would be audible only to its fans."

The world the way it is supposed to be would include, he said, strong marriages and secure children, nations and races would treasure their differences. Men would defer to women and women to men. Government officials would tell the truth. Public telephone books would be left intact. Highway overpasses would be graffiti free. Former gang members would be in law school. No motorist would ever cut off another on the freeway and if it happened, each would wave a friendly greeting rather than giving each the international gesture of contempt. Business associates would rejoice in one another's promotions.

"Newspapers would be filled with well-written accounts of acts of great moral beauty and, at the end of the day, people on their porches would read these and call to each other about them and savor them with their single martini," which the professor suggests, "in a perfect world, would be called a martinus." [*Ibid,* p. 182/183]

Well — that may be the way things are supposed to be, but that is not the way things are, except in brief, fleeting incidents which occur just frequently enough to make us wistful. We know in our hearts what could be but isn't, not here, not anywhere the utopian dreamers ultimately teach us. And that hard fact, that undeniable gap between what should be, could, and what is, is one of the reasons for religion, and one of the great puzzles of human history.

Our religion attributes the gap to a single three letter word — sin. Our forebears, the Calvinists, became specialists on the topic of sin, calling it "original," creating powerful metaphors, "total depravity," for instance, and liturgical phrases that sometimes catch in 20th century throats.

The old general confession said "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done." — which is probably universally true, but the old Calvinists couldn't resist one concluding flourish — "And there is no health in us."

None? No health? None. Not even a little bit? Not even when people are generous and kind and creative and self-sacrificing? None, said the old Calvinists - who were far more sure of themselves than Calvin himself — even in the middle of doing healthy and good things people are inevitably harboring feelings of pride and superiority at their goodness, maybe even planning to write a book about their generosity and earn a dollar or two.

"No health in us." Things are not the way they are supposed to be because of original sin, they said. And then, to make matters worse, religionists gradually stripped away all the mystery and claimed to know too much: that infants, born in sin, are damned unless they are baptized, for instance: that "born in sin" must mean the way we got conceived itself is the basic problem. Sex itself must be sinful. Preachers became expert at delineating the particularities. Proclamation of the Gospel became describing wrong doing. Guilt, contrition and confession, instead of leading to forgiveness, redemption and freedom seemed to lead inevitably to more guilt. "I don't go to church because I don't want to feel guilty." I've heard it said with some consistency.

And so at our moment in history, Christian religion strives to be guilt-free, as much as possible, and the best way to do that, of course, is simply to avoid the topic of sin altogether.

There's more than enough guilt to go around. Who needs more? What we need is less guilt, more freedom. A character in a Peter DeVries novel says:

> "There was a time when we were afraid of being caught doing something sinful in front of our ministers. Now we are afraid of being caught doing something immature in front of our therapists."
> [Thomas G. Long, "God Be Merciful to Me, A Miscalculator," *Theology Today*, op. cit.]

Pop psychology — not the real thing, but the self-help therapy that sells a lot of paperback books — pop psychology says that what we really need is to learn how to feel good about ourselves, to learn how to be our own best friend, to feel okay. Popular religion knows the secret. Sin is a tough sell. People want to feel good, not bad. The pastor of a mega-church whose target market is urban baby boomers, said candidly,

> "As a pastor to boomers, I'm convinced that they need to hear even negative messages presented in positive terms. It's the grid through which we filter them."
> [see *Context*, 7/15/93]

So, the Calvinists overdid it, got carried away by their own eloquence in describing what's wrong with us; focusing on petty moralisms, most of them sexual. And a reaction set in. Religion simply dropped the subject. *Whatever Happened to Sin?* Karl Menninger asked twenty years ago. And the answer is that for the most part, we dropped it.

Trouble is, things still aren't the way they are supposed to be, and we know it. Feeling good about ourselves does not eliminate or even hide the persistence of evil. If religion loses its nerve, and drops the subject, it won't go away.

Interestingly, *The New York Times Book Review* this past summer ran a series of essays by American authors on the topic of sin. Gore Vidal wrote about pride; Joyce Carol Oates — despair; anger — Mary Gordon; and lust — who else but John Updike?

Without some doctrine of sin, we simply have no vocabulary to discuss, in depth, the human situation. My suggestion is that what the Christian faith understands and knows about the human condition, from its scripture and theological tradition, may be one of its most important resources: that perhaps one of the most valuable contributions we can make is our notion of what's wrong.

What is it? What exactly is sin? For one thing, it's complex.

Here are some of the ways the Christian tradition has discussed it:

- God made us for harmony... sin is whatever spoils, adulterates, fouls, the harmony of creation.
- Sin is missing the target, straying from the path, getting lost in the wilderness.
- Sin is whatever separates us from the love of people whose love we want and need — our parents, spouses, friends, God.
- Sin is whatever gets between us and God, which always means getting between us and our own better selves. Sin is personal and social.
- Sin is pride: the inherent tendency of every human being to see himself/herself at the center of the world.
- Sin, a Lutheran theologian said recently is whatever hurts, causes pain to other people and to yourself.
- Sin is not simply personal immorality, breaking the rules. Rather our best thinkers have suggested that there is about sin a mysterious inclination to become huge without anybody's realizing it or intending it. Who after all intends Somalia, Bosnia? Who set out to create Cabrini-Green the way it is today?

No one ever said it better than St. Paul:

> "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." [Romans 7:15]

Are we totally depraved? Is there "no health in us"? These are no longer helpful ways of describing our situation. And yet only the naive can ignore the reality of what we used to call sin individually and corporately. And the importance of the topic is very simply that Christian faith offers not guilt — but resolution: not self-inflicted remorse, but restoration; and in restoration the hope that things will become what they are supposed to be.

Faith suggests that there is hope and health in being honest about our situation. Faith suggests that confession is good for the soul — that the resolution to guilt is not learning to feel good, but forgiveness. Faith suggests that things start to become what they could be when we look one another in the eye and ask for forgiveness and when, together, somehow, even when we cannot and should not confess to each other, we lift up our prayers to the God whose love can always forgive and heal and bring about a new creation. Faith, sometimes a voice crying in the wilderness, suggests that one of the happiest, best moments of the week is when we say together,

"Believe the good news: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

One day the religious people gathered around Jesus and complained that he was associating with sinners. They knew what sin was. It was disobeying the law — the Ten Commandments. It was ignoring the rules, living outside the structures of common morality. So he told a wonderful story about a family in which there were two sons. It is often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but there are two sons, each with a very serious problem and the fact that we identify the story by the younger son and not his older brother itself is glaring evidence of the difficulty we have with this topic. This is a story about the subtlety of sin. There are two sons, not one.

The younger brother is easy to understand. His sin is direct, bold, clear, and appalling. "I can't wait till you die," he tells his father. "I want to be me; I want mine now." And he takes his share of the family assets and goes as far away as he can, spends it all, is reduced to nothing and then comes to himself; which is to say remembers whose son he is. So he goes home, his father welcomes him, won't even allow him to complete his well rehearsed confession, orders a party to celebrate the son's return.

There is something universally attractive about the lusty rogue who "goes for all the gusto he can get," falls on rough times, sees the error of his ways, repents, returns, reforms and lives happily ever after, devoting his life to social justice and the eradication of hunger. His sin is simple, his conversion — if not easy — at least is uncomplicated.

That's the first half of the story. There is another son. He didn't go anywhere. He is dutiful, hard working, reliable, and responsible. He is also older, more mature. He is working in the field when his younger brother comes home. But when he hears the music and laughter of the party, he refuses to join in. His absence is an insult, not only to his brother but also his father. He's the oldest. He's supposed to be greeting guests and offering the first toast.

So for a second time, the father leaves the house to go out and find a lost son. And when he finds him, says, "Child — you are with me always . . . all that is mine is yours."

And I think Jesus is now looking directly into the faces of the religious types who are complaining because he associates with sinners, looking them directly in the eye, because they love the way this story started with the conspicuous sin of the younger son whose behavior was so like the riff-raff Jesus was befriending. But they started to squirm when the young son is not reprimanded but welcomed home. And now, with Jesus looking them directly in the eyes, his moving from face to face, they know with a terrible clarity that he's talking about them when he describes another child of God — this one alienated by his own pride and resentment and lovelessness.

Rembrandt painted the scene late in his own life, I suspect, after he had known about both kinds of alienation. A reproduction of the reunion is in the exhibit in Flynn Hall and we have placed small copies of the great painting on posters throughout the building. The moment of reunion, the young son, thin, pathetic, on both knees, surrounded by the sheltering embrace of his father . . . his sword still at his waist, the symbol of his family, the reminder of the love of his parents. Rembrandt brings the older brother to the scene... he's the first figure on the right; Rembrandt has him standing by watching impassively, enigmatically, almost as if he doesn't want to believe what is happening.

That's us in there, of course. That's the subtlety of sin which infects not only the lusty sinners, but the dependable, hard working, responsible older brothers and sisters. A friend of mine who taught at Wabash College used to say that the older brother must be a Presbyterian. He is anyone who can't believe God loves unconditionally, and so works very hard to be accepted, lovable, worthy, who is never quite able to do it alone, never quite sure he/she is worthy, acceptable, loved, and who is then devastated to witness an unconditional love which extends to the unacceptable, unlovable, unworthy.

Whatever happened to the older brother in the parable? It's one of the great puzzles of the Bible. Jesus left the matter open, unsolved, Henri Nouwen wrote, precisely to "leave us face to face with one of life's hardest spiritual choices: to trust or not to trust God's all forgiving love." [*The Return of The Prodigal Son,* p. 69/70]

I am an older brother. Not only because I am a hard working Presbyterian, but in fact I am an older brother. When I was a youngster one of the most unpleasant things I had to do was go find my little brother at dinner time. He was five. I was twelve. The meal would be ready to be served. Hungry and with other places to be and people to see, my chores done, hands clean and shirt tucked in, I was ready to eat. My little brother, I recall, lived at that time in a land without clocks, a blissful place with no concept of time. So he wouldn't be there. And I was sent to find him. I didn't like to do it, and I performed my duty devoid of graciousness: found him, put him precariously on the bar of my bicycle and pedaled home, assuring him all the way that he

was in deep trouble, that he was going to get it. And then disappointment when we arrived and mother helped him wash his hands and we sat down to dinner, without any mention of his persistent infraction of this basic family rule. He didn't get punished. I didn't get praised. It wasn't fair!

There are few experiences in this life that are as powerful, as redemptive and healing and pregnant with possibility as unmerited patience, undeserved forgiveness, unexpected love. When they happen to us we are sometimes shattered and frequently changed for the better, converted.

They are experiences of grace. And whether they happen in church or in the world, we Christians believe they have something in them of that divine grace, that "Amazing Grace" of a mother or father who goes to both lost children: whose love knows no condition: whose embrace is for all.

In the short story and movie, *A River Runs Through It,* there is a family with two sons, not unlike the two in the parable. The younger of the two is full of life, irreverent, lusty, lives mostly in a far country, gambles, associates with loose women. The older is steady, industrious, has gone to college. The story is built around the father's and his sons' love of fly fishing.

The younger son's skills at casting are artistic. The father and older brother, near the end, when you know something heartbreaking and tragic is about to happen, are watching the younger brother in the river casting and pulling in a gorgeous trout. It's a work of art.

The older son, the author, Norman MacLean, is the narrator.

> "'That's his limit,' I said to my father.
>
> "'He is beautiful,' my father said.
>
> "That was the last fish we were ever to watch Paul catch.
>
> "While my father was watching my brother, he reached over to pat me, but he missed, so he had to turn his eyes and look for my knee and try again. He must have thought I felt neglected and that he should tell me he was proud of me also but for other reasons." [*A River Runs Through It,* Norman MacLean, p. 108]

The good news is that God loves us all — prodigals who leave home and live in distant countries, and prodigals who stay home and are separated from God by resentment and pride.

The good news is that God is ready to forgive all, and to welcome back each daughter, each son.

> "Amazing grace," that is to say,
> "how sweet the sound . . .
> I once was lost, but now am found. . . ."

Amen.